

# Conservatives chafe at Baker

By Charlotte Saikowski

Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

Washington

To the dismay of far-right conservatives, the White House is acquiring a Republican "establishment" look.

Chief of staff Howard Baker Jr. is moving swiftly to set a mood of rejuvenation and congeniality as the President struggles to get ahead of the Iran-contra crisis. Close Reagan allies voice relief that the White House has seized a chance to return to the politically sensitive style of governing and the ideological pragmatism that marked the Reagan first term.

To conservatives on the right, the changes at the White House spell abandonment of the Reagan agenda and the rise of Republican moderation. Their concern is that Mr. Baker, whose views in the past have differed from those of the President, will use his political skills to push a more conciliatory course on such issues as a tax increase (which Baker favored) and the President's "star wars" missile-shield program.

"Conservatives feel betrayed and abandoned," says right-wing conservative activist Richard A. Viguerie. "In 1980 Reagan ran against the old-boy network in town and said we needed new people. Now, with no exception, there is a total surrender to the Washington establishment."

In two short days Baker has:

- Begun a reorganization of the White House that will see the departure of many key aides to former chief of staff Donald Regan.
- Dealt with the sticky problem of withdrawing the nomination of Robert Gates to head central intelligence. The fact that Mr. Gates will remain as CIA deputy director complicated the replacement effort.
- Met with the press to convey that President Reagan is energetic and on top of things, as contrasted with the Tower Commission's portrayal of him.

In keeping with the conspicuous White House effort to show presidential involvement, Mr. Reagan spoke to the National Security Council staff, telling them he endorsed the Tower report and expected the staff to follow the recommended model of how the NSC should work.

"Views must be fully aired," the President said. "Agency participation should not be short-cut. I want the range of options developed for my consideration. Legal issues must be addressed head on and the rule of law respected. And, of course, recommendations and decisions must be properly documented."

The whirl of activity at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue

comes as a new poll shows a dramatic decline in Reagan's approval rating. The latest New York Times/CBS survey, taken after the Tower report's release, finds that only 42 percent of Americans approve of how he is doing his job — the lowest since January 1963.

As Reagan prepares for his critical address tonight, Republican allies and strategists are quietly advising him that he should take personal responsibility for the Iran-contra scandal, rather than blame wayward aides and leave the door open to further damaging disclosures. "He should blame no one and open up the option that there may be more," one GOP insider says.

In this situation, Baker's role is also viewed as critical. "Howard Baker is at as much risk as Ronald Reagan because the speech will have his imprimatur on it," says the source.

The conservative right, meanwhile, worries that Baker and his new team, which does not include a right-wing firebrand like former communications director Patrick Buchanan, will maneuver the President into compromising on his domestic and foreign policy agenda in the interests of surviving politically.

"This could be the last surrender of the establishment Republicans to Ronald Reagan," says Paul Weyrich, head of the Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress. "Reagan made a convert out of George Bush and Richard Schweiker. . . . But Howard is more sophisticated in the practice of politics and more adept at pushing his own agenda subtly."

Congressman Jack Kemp (R) of New York, who is running for president in 1988, has also sounded his misgivings. "There are vital issues to conservatives, like early deployment of SDI [Strategic Defense Initiative] and not allowing [House Speaker] Jim Wright to push through a tax increase," says John Buckley, the congressman's press spokesman. "In the near term we're willing to give Baker the benefit of the doubt, because he says he intends to carry out the President's wishes. But conservatives are concerned about the agenda."

Reagan insiders are not troubled by the blast from the right wing. In their view, the President has always moved toward the center in practical terms and does not intend to push the right's social agenda. It is better for conservatives to be sniping at Howard Baker and other aides, Reagan allies say, than at the President, although the expected carping will add to Baker's difficulties.

Some personnel changes are already in place. Baker has appointed his former law partner, A. B. Culvahouse, to be the White House legal counsel. Several key aides appointed under Mr. Regan will stay on, including presidential spokesman Marlin Fitzwater and Frank Donatelli, a lawyer and veteran Reagan campaign operative who will become White House political adviser. By the time the changes are completed, most of Regan's longtime aides are expected to be out.

With the recent resignation of Pat Buchanan, there is no one at the White House to sound the trumpet on right-wing conservative issues. The task may fall to Secretary of Education William Bennett, who is known to be eager to enhance his visibility at the White House and carry the rhetorical torch for the President.